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Arahantship

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by

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Arahantship

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to the study of the Theravāda usage of the word Arahant. Before discussing the primary topic, I have made a cursory review of the etymology of the word and some references to some non-Buddhist usages of the word. The focus of this effort is to review the various references to Arahants and the attainment of Arahantship which can be found in the Theravāda tradition, the suttas and scholarly studies. In attempting to reach the deep roots in such a tradition, of necessity I have omitted or condensed much valuable information. Economy of time and space can be hopefully considered a help to the reader in affording him a fairly facile review of the Arahant problem in a brief essay.

The Pali word *arahat*, in Sanskrit *arahat*, is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *arh*. Sir Monier-Williams lists the various definitions of the root *arh* as follows: to deserve merit, be worthy of, to have claim to, be entitled to, to be allowed to do anything. [1] In this form it is used similarly in Pali scriptures.

In the *Rig Veda* (11, 3.3) the god Agni is described as an *arahat*. [2] In the *Upanisads*, the word as noun

appears several times as well as in the *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa*, (III 4–1–3; III 4–1–6). [3] It seems evident that in the ancient Indian tradition the root and its derivatives were used to indicate great worth in a generally reverential and laudatory way. These usages of the word Arahant were thus extant prior to the advent of Buddhism when the term Arahant became extremely popular and used to define an ideal religious type within the Buddhist tradition.

Another example of non-Buddhist usage of the Arahant designation occurs in the Jain Sutras. [4] In these sutras, their leader Mahāvīra who died 527 B.C., [5] is referred to as an Arhat. Horner [6] suggests that Arahant was a word used by the public for those spiritually advanced persons worthy of being supported by alms. Additionally, there seems to be a suggestion that these Arahants possessed special spiritual powers that augmented their moral attributes—powers approaching the divine in the eyes of the common man. That the Jains see Arahants as omniscient ones [7] suggests not only that these Arahants have attained moral worth but also that they possess these divine powers that set them apart from merely religious or devout persons. Monier-Williams gives several definitions for the noun Arahant, one being “an Arhat or superior divinity of the Jains.” [8] The Jain religious movement was powerful at the time

Buddhism was growing and both traditions drew on the common idiom, Arahant, in their religious vocabulary.

A noted Buddhist scholar has further defined the term Arahant. T. W. Rhys Davids makes the following distinction between the exclusively Buddhist usage of the term and the application in other religious communities: “In its Pali form, Arahant, it is met with in the earliest Buddhist texts, and is used there in two senses, firstly applied to the Buddhist Arahants, and secondly to those belonging to other communities. In the latter sense, which is exceedingly rare (Vinaya, I 30–32; Saṃyutta, II 220), it means a man who has attained to the ideal of that particular community, to what was regarded in it as the fit state for a religious man. This sense is not found in pre-Buddhist literature; but the usage by the early Buddhists makes it almost certain that the term was employed, before Buddhism arose, among the religious communities then being formed in N.E. India. In the more usual, the Buddhist sense, the technical term Arahant is applied to those who have reached the end of the Eightfold Path, and are enjoying the fruits of it, the *maggaphalaṭṭha*. They have perfected themselves in each of the eight stages of the Path—right views, aspirations, speech, conduct, mode of livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and rapture.” [9]

Thus it is seen that the term Arahant originally was not peculiar to the Buddhist community, but came in time exclusively to denote a particular type of individual among the Buddhists.

It is reasonable to pose the question at this juncture, “What is an Arahant in the Buddhist sense of the word?” Weeratne states:

“In its usage in early Buddhism the term denotes a person who had gained insight into the true nature of things.” [10]

Nancy Wilson Ross offers a very clear definition that would explain the term to the beginner student:

“[An arahat is] an individual who through unremitting meditative effort attains release from the ‘round of becoming’ for himself alone.” [11]

Conze sees Arahants as those who have followed the Buddha’s teachings to the point they gain personal freedom; and he quotes:

“Ah, happy indeed the Arahants! In them no craving’s found. The ‘I am’ conceit is rooted out; confusion’s net is burst. Lust-free they have attained; translucent is the mind of them. Unspotted in the world are they, Brahma-

become, with outflows none.” [12]

Thus, within the Buddhist schema, an Arahant has freed himself from his karmic bondage by following the Buddha’s precepts (*Samyutta Nikāya* III, 83). He seeks wisdom to effect his liberation. He has shifted his concerns from the worldly scene to a search within himself. He has devoted his total energies to the Buddha’s great dictum, “Work out your own salvation with diligence,” achieved thereby a state of perfect spiritual poise, and rooted out his imperfections by diligently following the Eightfold Path. His goal is unassailable tranquillity by the loss of selfishness and self-belief. The great virtue of this goal is that it is a radiant example to others of the truth of the Buddha’s words. This person who has reached an ideal state can inspire calm and help others on to self-liberation. He is free of rebirth upon his earthly death.

How is the liberated state achieved and how can the Eightfold Path be handled? The Arahant has to destroy the *āsavas*. The *āsavas* are given as four: [13]

1. Sensuality (*kāma*)
2. Lust of life (*bhava*)
3. Speculation (*ditṭhi*)
4. Ignorance (*avijjā*)

Āsavas mean floods, overflows, leakages, cankers or intoxicants. Monier-Williams gives the original Sanskrit meaning as a spirituous liquor from the verbal root *ā*: to press out or to distill. [14] It is taken to mean the leakages and impurities that are being pressed out of the still-impure seeker. To attain an unfettered condition, he must seal off these leakages and seepings by containing no more impurities within himself. Once these deadly sins are conquered, the path to freedom from earthly bondage is open for him to tread.

There is a list of ten fetters that is given in Buddhist texts. These are evil conditions or mental impediments to attaining Arahantship. The four stages of Sainthood are attained by a gradual elimination of these fetters. Then, with the eradication of all ten, the fourth stage is reached and the aspirant will be entitled to the designation Arahant, a truly Worthy One.

In the discourses of the Buddha, the ten fetters (*dasa saṃyojanā*) are listed as follows:

1. *Sakkāya diṭṭhi*, the delusion of self or soul
2. *Vicikicchā*, doubt
3. *Sīlabbata parāmāsa*, dependence upon rites
4. *Kāmacchanda*, sense-desire
5. *Paṭigha*, hatred or resentment

6. *Rūparāga*, desire for life in fine-material worlds
7. *Arūparāga*, desire for life in immaterial worlds
8. *Māna*, pride
9. *Uddhacca*, agitation
10. *Avijjā*, ignorance

This list of evil desires and imperfect attitudes is in the order in which they must be faced. These fetters progress in difficulty to conquer, the last fetter, *avijjā* or ignorance, being the most difficult to shed for the spiritual aspirant.

There are four separate Stages or Paths which the person desirous of shedding his fetters and attaining Arahantship must attain. They are:

1. *Sotāpanna*, the stream entrant
2. *Sakadāgāmi*, the once returner
3. *Anāgāmi*, the non-returner
4. Arahant

The *āsava*s and fetters are eliminated as these stages are completed. By the elimination of the first three fetters, stream entry is reached; by the weakening of the fourth and fifth, once-returning; by eliminating these, non-returning; and by cutting the last five fetters, Arahantship is attained. Arahantship or Stage

Four is equivalent to liberation.

The thoroughly cleansed Arahant becomes enlightened like the Buddha because of his process of meditation, purification and austerities upon attaining his goal, Arahantship. The term Arahant is used here to define a type of spiritual conqueror. He has claim to his victory when the goal, self-liberation, has been achieved.

At the time of the Buddha's first sermon, delivered in the Deer Park at Sarnath, he clearly stated that he had attained to full enlightenment that is supreme. [15] At this time, the Buddha had five special disciples, monks who accepted his teaching and quickly realised their own Arahantship. So by the time of the second sermon, there were six Arahants in the world, including the Buddha himself. [16] During his preaching years, one can only assume that his liberating message and the gift of his teachings were sufficient to attract many followers who could be released from their earthly bondage and become Arahants. One thousand bhikkhus, for instance, reached that goal on listening to the Buddha's Fire Sermon. [17]

The usage of the word Arahant can be extended to cover certain women followers, although it is a term usually used in the masculine form grammatically. In

the Buddhist movement at the time of Gotama's life, there were two groups in the ranks of the women followers. There were those who supported the Buddha as lay devotees and those who actively sought admission to monastic orders as bhikkhunī or almswoman. There seems to be some unclear issues concerning the origin of these women monastics. I. B. Horner notes:

“Although several other considerations might be urged to prove that he, being human and an Indian of the sixth century B.C., did rather tremble at the idea of creating an order for almswomen, there are others to prove or to suggest that he did not actually want it.” [18]

That a woman became a monastic was not to be interpreted that she attained Arahantship concurrently. Being a woman Arahant and/or being a bhikkhunī are not necessarily interchangeable attainments. The Buddha's radical social views on eliminating caste and elevating the status of women unleashed forces that account for new social categories. A bhikkhunī is rather a new social or vocational attainment while Arahantship for women is a spiritual attainment, as it is for men.

It is fairly certain that the Buddha ultimately recognised both radical new estates for women.

Horner devotes most of an entire volume to researching this subject from which I quote a few pertinent statements:

“It would appear then that Gotama did not speak from experience when he told Ānanda that ‘they are capable’ of gaining arahatship, but from faith and reasoning, fully justified by later events.” [19]

“Four courtesans ... having been converted to Buddhism, entered the order and attained to Arahantship.” [20]

“There was nothing in their station or in their previous circumstances to hinder them from attaining Arahantship.” [21]

One can safely infer that the Buddha opened his teachings to women, allowed them in almswomen orders and never denied their chance to attain the great liberation of becoming an Arahant.

Arahantship is equivalent to the attainment of Nirvana (Pali: Nibbāna) which need not be delayed until death but is realisable during the lifetime. If we take Nibbāna as the final elimination of the ten fetters and the cessation of defilements (*kilesa-nibbāna*), it can be said to have been reached here and now, and the scriptures call it “Nibbāna with a remnant of the

substrata of existence still present” (*sa-upādi-sesa nibbāna*). If Nibbāna is taken as the “cessation of becoming (*bhava-nirodha*) or the cessation of the aggregates of existence” (*khandha-nibbāna*), this is called “Nibbāna without a remnant of substrata” (*anupādisesa-nibbāna*). It occurs at the death of the Arahant, which is not followed by any further rebirth. [22]

From this it can be seen that the decisive factor in the Buddhist concept of Nibbāna is the stopping of rebirth-producing craving and ignorance, and not so much the stopping of the individual life process which is the lawful result of the former.

There are two suicide stories in the Buddhist canons that tell of Arahantship achieved at death. One tells of the monk Godhika who lamented his chances of ever attaining permanent freedom because his trances were never unbroken. He despaired and committed suicide even though the embodiment of evil, Māra, had intervened and called upon the Buddha. The master blessed the dead monk, saying:

“Yes, so do the steadfast act, they do not yearn for life. Tearing out craving with its root, Godhika has attained complete Nirvana.” [23]

This tale from the *Samyutta Nikāya* (S I 122–23)

indicated that Godhika's intent and output of vigour towards the goal of achieving liberation assured him of extinguished karma and thus no liability for rebirth.

For another monk, Channa, suicide was a way to end the torture of terminal illness and its attendant pain. Channa slit his throat. When his fellow monks asked after his spiritual future, the Buddha assured them he would not be reborn and that he reached Nibbāna upon death. [24]

In early Buddhist Theravāda literature and commentaries, there is no dearth of expansion of references to Arahants, but there is little further amplification of the usage of the term beyond the type of selections noted. With the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism (1st century A.D.), the picture changed because the Arahant ideal encountered religious rivalry with the advent of a newer spiritual ideal, the Bodhisattva. This word is a purely Buddhist formation [25] and, unlike Arahant, it was not a current word in the culture of that time.

The Mahāyāna works add virtually nothing to the usage of the term Arahant or to the further development of the function of this religious ideal. Horner assures us that the Mahāyāna writings from this era onward only serve to emphasise a stereotype when the word Arahant is employed. [26] A post-

canonical Pali writer, Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*, treats the Arahant as “a person who is fit to receive alms and who doesn’t behave like a fool.” [27] However, in the Theravāda tradition, the Arahant remained revered and highly esteemed. Horner notes:

“Naturally those lands—Ceylon, Burma, and Siam—which have kept the canonical tradition practically unbroken throughout the ages, clung to and still cling to the Arahant as the embodiment of the highest state to which man can rise. [28]

Today in the Theravāda tradition this ideal is still one of great religious import and given highly reverential status.

However high the ideal of the Bodhisattva has risen, the value of the Arahant cannot be glossed over or rescinded. In Theravāda Buddhism, it was the renunciation of selfish desire that led Arahants on to their solitary, spiritual path. The paradox of the Arahant position is that their self-concern is aimed at being victorious over their ego and ridding themselves of a concept of self. Their annihilation of all personal attachments affords them release from pain, fetters and rebirth. The Arahant has no more earthly or heavenly ambitions to realise. The faculty of his self-

insight leads him, with the instrument of the Buddha's teaching, to liberation. This position may not be disfavoured in face of the newer, popular and humanitarian calling of the Bodhisattva's concern for all beings.

Within the total area of the Buddhist world, time has only suggested a change of emphasis from the ideal of the Arahant to the Bodhisattva. This fluctuation has not tarnished the goal of the Arahant quoted from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as one whose deeds are abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a Palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The usage of the word Arahant has been neither dimmed nor drained of its meaning dating from the era of the Buddha.

Perhaps the greatest legacy the Arahant has to offer is that in helping himself he helps others in a reflection process. He removes himself from the crowded ranks of the miserable in the world. He offers an example of self-redemption to others who could or would, if reassured, follow the same demanding way to freedom. The specific definitions, from the Theravāda teaching, of the Arahant's values eliminate the hazards of the Bodhisattva's saviourship calling. For the Arahant is freed from the corrupting chance that one might seek a false reputation for charity, by doing good works for others. The Arahant's way of triumph

over self is a teaching in the example of achievement of liberation. The heart of the Buddhist teaching is to help man to Arahantship by the methods the Buddha outlined, so that man may win over his turmoils and reach the new shores of deliverance and liberation.

Notes

1. Sir Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), p. 93. [\[Back\]](#)
2. W. G. Weeratne, "Arahant," *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, editor, G. P. Malalasekera, Vol. II (Ceylon: Government Press, 1966), p. 41. [\[Back\]](#)
3. I. B. Horner, *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected* (London: Williams & Norgate Ltd., 1936), pp. 53-55. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Jain Sutras, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXII, p. 19, quoted by Weeratne, *op. cit.*, p. 41. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and C. A. Moore, eds, *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press paperback, 6th edition, 1967), p.250. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Horner, *op. cit.*, Ch III. [\[Back\]](#)
7. *Sacred books of the Jainas II*, trans by J. L. Jaina, *Tattvārthadhigama Sūtra*, Ch. 6, quoted by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and C. A. Moore, eds, *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press paperback, 6th edition, 1967), p. 257. [\[Back\]](#)

8. Monier-Williams, *op. cit.* p. 93. [\[Back\]](#)
9. T. W. Rhys Davids, "Arahant," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. I, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Books, 1968), p. 123. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Weeratne, *op. cit.*, p. 41. [\[Back\]](#)
11. Nancy Wilson Ross, *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom* (New York: Clarion Books, 1968), p. 123. [\[Back\]](#)
12. Edward Conze, ed. *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torch Book, 1964), p. 42. [\[Back\]](#)
13. H.G.A. van Zeyst, "Āsavas," *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. G.P. Malalasekera, Vol. II (Ceylon: Government Press, 1966), pp. 154-155. [\[Back\]](#)
14. Monier-Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 160. [\[Back\]](#)
15. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 56:11. [\[Back\]](#)
16. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 22:59. [\[Back\]](#)
17. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 35:28. [\[Back\]](#)
18. I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1930), p. 105. [\[Back\]](#)
19. *Ibid.*, p. 98. [\[Back\]](#)
20. *Ibid.*, p. 89. [\[Back\]](#)

21. *Ibid.*, p. 172. [\[Back\]](#)
22. Itivuttaka, No. 38. [\[Back\]](#)
23. Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 43. [\[Back\]](#)
24. Lord Chalmers, tr. *Further Dialogues of the Buddha, Majjhima Nikāya*, Vol. II (London: Pali Text Society, 1927), p. 173. [\[Back\]](#)
25. L. de la Vallee Poussin, “Bodhisattva,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 11, *op. cit.*, p. 739. [\[Back\]](#)
26. I. B. Horner, *Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected* (London: Williams & Norgate Ltd., 1936), p. 178. [\[Back\]](#)
27. *Ibid.*, p. 180. [\[Back\]](#)
28. *Ibid.*, p. 192. [\[Back\]](#)

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